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ABSTRACT

This guide presents four criteria to help intake workers decide whether to remove children from their homes and place them elsewhere. The criteria are (1) the nature of the problems which lead to the placement request; (2) the parents' parental capacity; (3) the family's organization and its support systems; and (4) the child's developmental status and condition. It is suggested that to justify removal, at least one of the following conditions must exist: chronic neglect of the child; danger of child abuse; rejection of the family by the child; inability of parents to cope with the child's problems; and parental desertion or illness which leaves the child unprotected or uncared for. Discussion focuses on certain facts which need to be discerned to apply the four criteria, and on ways to uncover these facts. Forms related to the assessment effort are provided. (Author/DB)

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STRUCTURED ASSESSMENT

A Decision-Making Guide for Child Welfare

Region V

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Removal of a child from his home is radical treatment. Yet, intake workers in public and private agencies throughout the country are faced with this decision weekly. Many feel ill-equipped to make this important decision--deciding whether a child should be removed from his own home and placed elsewhere in order to prevent or correct home conditions which might seriously damage the child. This guide was developed to help in this decision-making. It presents four criteria a worker can use to measure the need for placement and it tells the worker the kind of facts he or she must discern in order to apply the criteria. It suggests ways to uncover these facts and leads the worker to make judgments regarding them, thus deciding whether the child can remain at home.

This process, known as a social study, has as its goal the making of an informed decision about placement. Traditional social work values undergird this social study. These values are:

- The value of the family and its common bonds and experience.
- Respect for the motivations and potential of all persons involved.
- The right of individuals and families to be enabled to find their own ways to resolve problems.
- The individualization of each situation and the maximum engagement of each family member in the decision-making and helping process.

An intermediate goal of the social study is the stabilization of the family to test its ability to overcome its problems enough to avoid the need for placement. Removal, being radical treatment, is justified only when certain conditions are present and when efforts to stabilize the family and assure the welfare of the child have failed--this is a basic premise of this guide. One or more of the following conditions must exist in order to justify removal:

- The child is unprotected or uncared for because of a crisis such as the absence of the parents due to illness or desertion.
- The child is suffering from chronic neglect.
- The child is in danger of abuse by the parents.
- The child presents problems with which the parents cannot cope.
- The child rejects his family and can only be stabilized in another setting.

Method of Study and Decision Formulation.

The decision-making process regarding possible removal of a child from his home involves two distinct steps. First, an exploratory study is required to decide whether a child can remain in his own home. Should it be decided that placement outside the home is required, a full social study must be undertaken. This second step is for the purpose of determining the type of placement resource which will best suit the child's needs, and the type of overall treatment plan required for the family. With an awareness that the essential first step in this process is often lost in the urgency of daily agency operation, this guide has been prepared to provide assistance in reaching the important initial decision of whether the child needs to be removed from his own home.

While understanding the situation is the primary purpose of the exploratory phase, early help may also be needed. This includes intervening on behalf of the parents or child with agencies such as schools, courts, public assistance agencies and health facilities. Such assistance in the exploratory phase can sometimes avoid the need for placement.

Making a proper decision about placement during the exploratory study requires one to understand the causes of the presenting problems and the circumstances contributing to them. Therefore, use of this guide requires:

- Knowledge of all referral information.
- Discussion with the parents about their life situation, including stresses, resources, and management of relationships and responsibilities.
- Discussion with the referred child about how he explains and reacts to the problems.
- Observation of the parents and the child, their response to the problematic aspects of their lives, their interactions with each other, and their response to helping persons.
- Reports from outside sources such as schools and other community agencies.

The methods used in this guide for gathering data, assessing them, and drawing conclusions for effective case planning are accepted social work methods: interviewing, observation, and the skilled use of a client-worker relationship. This approach recognizes the many influences affecting a family, the relationships within the family, the relationships with institutions, and persons to whom the family relates in the community.

This guide is organized into four criteria measuring the need for placement. Facts describing the problems and strengths of the family in terms of the criteria are identified, and ways of determining these facts are suggested. These factual data are inclusive, and not all items should be investigated in each situation. Rather, the social worker should use judgment to select only what is needed for responsible decision-making. The social worker best obtains a realistic view of the family's situation if he allows family members in interviews to follow their own train of thought related to the problems, while guiding them to consider their part in the situation, any resources available, and changes that might be achieved.

The guide provides space for recording information on the pages which describe each criterion. Additional pages will sometimes be necessary. For easy accessibility, recording should be in the form of brief notes. It should be factual as opposed to describing feelings about a situation. This is not an interviewing guide per se and the sequence and content of the interview should follow the trend of the client's thoughts and accounts of events. Information can later be recorded in the appropriate section of the guide where facts associated to the particular criterion can be reviewed together. To limit the inevitable duplication of material, a fact should be recorded only once, where it seems most pertinent.

The method is a process of gathering facts, sorting and recording them under the appropriate criterion and then arriving at a conclusion about the difficulties and strengths which the facts establish. This conclusion or judgment is required at the end of each criterion. At the end of the study, the separate conclusions from the four criteria lead to a final decision regarding whether placement is necessary. This decision and its rationale are recorded on the final page of the guide.

Criteria.

The four criteria by which the need for placement is evaluated are:

1. The nature of the problems which lead to the placement request.

   The type of problem presented indicates the degree of danger that faces the child and the degree of change that can be expected. Not only must the individual problems be considered, but also the constellation of problems and the relationships of circumstances which may mitigate or exacerbate the problems. The more pervasive and prevalent the problems, the less likely it may be that the home can be improved enough to meet minimal child care requirements.

The origin of pressure for placement may imply something about the nature of the problem and about outcome. If the school is the only agency pushing for placement, the situation may be quite different than if the family is requesting it or if the child has been in so much trouble with the courts that the authorities are urging placement. If an adolescent moves himself away from his family, the situation and what should be done about it is different than if an 8-year old is a chronic runaway. It is also significant if the problem resides primarily in one member of the family or in the family as a whole.

In assessing problems, one must consider the degree of deviance from accepted social norms. The greater the deviance, the greater the hazard for the child and the greater the need for skilled intervention.

The length of time a problem has existed is also a factor in modifiability. Chronic problems are harder to change than are crisis situations or problems of recent origin.

2. The parents' parental capacity.

The parents' capacity to give their child needed care and protection depends on the parents' own maturity and emotional strength. This strength is reflected in how they manage their major life roles. Rigidity, as opposed to flexibility or resilience, indicates the extent to which they may be able to use help. Their intelligence may also influence their accessibility and their ability to engage in problem solving. The amount of stress in their lives will affect the energy available for the child and for working on problems. By helping with problem solving on a very practical level, the worker may provide enough structure and order to the lives of these immature parents to meet the needs of the child.

Patterns of denying and blaming others, as opposed to the capacity for self-perception and a realistic view of events, suggest an unhealthy immaturity which is reflected in the parents' inability to put their child's needs ahead of their own. When parents respond to stress by acting out or by behaving impulsively, they may discharge enough of the anxiety which the stress engenders to reduce their motivation to change. It is these explosive parents who are child abuse risks. If the parents have a history of being abused or neglected children, they carry an extra handicap for good parenting of their own children.

Retardation, depression, or mental illness in the parents call for specialized professional diagnoses so that realistic assessments can be made of their parental capacity.

Many parents who either request or are referred for placement believe they have failed as parents and fear the loss of their child. Also, they often feel guilty about their shortcomings as parents and about their secret wish to be rid of the troublesome child. Most have experienced separations from their own parents or other important figures, and the emotions from these losses are reactivated by a threat of separation from their child.

Parents who cannot meet their child's needs were often not well cared for as children. They may transfer a resentment of their parents to all authority persons and express these resentments either by aggression or over-compliance. Such persons are deficient in their ability to trust others and often anticipate mistreatment. Their great need to be taken care of may be disguised as defiance, withdrawal or testing others. They may act out frustrations and be unable to control their impulsive behavior. Needing care on a child-like level themselves, they often look to the child for parenting. The child has little choice but to accommodate himself to his needy and sometimes depriving and cruel parents.

3. Organization of the family and its support systems.

This criterion measures the degree to which the family is a stable unit, united over a period of time with role-appropriate behavior on the part of parents and children. It identifies possible sources of family support such as relatives, friends, and social resources. The family stability is indicative of parental strength and of the amount of environmental stress or support the family has received.

A reasonable amount of separation and independence is required at appropriate ages if the child is to mature. Parents should permit differences for each other as well as for the child. Scapegoated children may be serving to stabilize the parents' real problem of marital discord. The parents' ability to move toward consideration of their own problems helps predict whether they need help to release the child from the scapegoated role and to deal with their own difficulties.

The availability of social supports is an important element in assessing the family's potential for growth. Such support may come from neighborhood ties, churches, schools, and/or relationships with relatives. Members of the extended family can be supportive if they are not overly dependent or intrusive.

There are some children whose homes are deficient, but who cannot use foster care. Some families cannot tolerate separation. Some are chaotic families who cause consternation to the community and about whom agencies receive much pressure. Others are schizophrenic families whose energies are so turned in, and whose members are so emotionally dependent on each other, that separation of the child only causes further problems. These children need relationships with healthy adults with whom they can identify, but assessment of the family may lead to the conclusion that this can be best done without breaking up the family.

4. Developmental status and condition of each child.

Assessing developmental status and the general social, emotional, and physical condition of each child reveals the possible effects of problems in the family and of deficient child care practices on the child's development. It also identifies the special needs of individual children and the extent to which the environment adequately meets them.

The characteristics of individual children, including age, constitution, the way they use their experience, and their particular place in the emotional constellation of the family often suggest whether they may escape the results of serious deficits in the family. A vulnerable child may be unable to survive even moderately deficient conditions.

The child's ability to use placement will depend on whether or not he can be helped to develop a relationship with substitute parents, i.e., transfer dependence to another parent person. Often it may be hazardous for the child to be separated from his parents without considerable prior help. Such situations would involve an exclusive, highly need-meeting relationship with mother so that his dependence is great and separation evokes a great deal of anxiety; or, if he is at the developmental stage, usually 18 months to 3 years, when the presence of the familiar parent is crucial for reassurance as the child experiments with independence.

Some children present symptoms which indicate a need for specialized help and placement outside the family. This is true if the needed help can only be provided in a specially designed setting or if the parents cannot cope with the child's problems at home. Exceedingly hyperactive children, very withdrawn children or children with other bizarre behavior may fall into this group. Some handicapped children may need periods in schools designed for special education. Problems suggestive of retardation, handicaps, or emotional maladjustment require diagnosis by a specialist.

Sometimes parents and children, especially adolescents, are completely alienated from each other and see placement as the only option. Then it may be necessary to make the most constructive placement possible until the adolescent can manage independence and he and the family can come to terms with their relationship. Usually a foster home isn't appropriate for an adolescent and group homes or their equivalent are needed.

In summary, the problems which children and their families present when placement is an issue must be considered in their total social context. Factors which caused the problem and keep it going must be identified so that they can be the targets for changes. The degree of current risk for the children, and the probable degree of modifiability which is suggested by the nature of the problems, the strengths of the parents, and the available supports become the basis for deciding on the service of choice. The extent to which it has been possible to engage the family in consideration of its difficulties and in options for modifying them are important prognostic factors for designing on-going help and predicting outcome.

The emphasis of this guide, then, is the acquisition and application of objective data to the four criteria discussed. Conclusions reached in each of the criteria should lead the worker to an objective understanding of the child's situation. It is this understanding upon which a decision should be based as to whether or not the radical treatment of removal is required.

SUGGESTED REFERENCES

Erikson, Erik H. Childhood and Society. Second Edition. W.W. Norton, Inc. New York, 1963. Chapter 7. Eight Ages of Man.

Erikson identifies eight ego qualities which are correlated with critical periods of development and provide a structure for viewing the development of the person epigenetically. This conceptualization is useful for the social worker in assessing the needs and capacities of children and families.

Garrett, Annette. Interviewing: Its Principles and Methods. Family Services Association of America. New York. 1942. Part One.

Part One of this book provides a guide to interviewing and presents simply and briefly the elements that are crucial to understanding interview process and to participating as an effective interviewer.

Kline, Draza and Helen-Mary Forbush Overstreet. Foster Care of Children: Nurture and Treatment. Child Welfare League of America. 1972.

This book was developed from the authors' many years of practice and teaching in the field of foster care. The placement process is discussed from intake through termination and the processes involved in practice at each stage are presented thoroughly and clearly with many case examples. The bibliography provides a helpful guide for further study.

Murphy, Lois Barclay. Problems in Recognizing Emotional Disturbance in Children. Child Welfare League of America. New York. (Reprint from Child Welfare). December 1963).

The author presents a structure which helps to differentiate levels of disturbance in children and the differing therapeutic responses which are appropriate to them: clear-cut, extreme disturbances; less severe disturbances; the normal vicissitudes of development.

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Source Book on Foster Care Services. School of Social Welfare. Louisiana State University, Baton Rouge, La. 1975. Arndt, Hilda C.M. Project Director.

This collection of papers was prepared during training workshops for child welfare workers as part of a project under the auspices of the United States Department of Health, Education and Welfare. The papers are organized under the following headings: Initial Decision-Making in Meeting the Objectives of Foster Care; Ongoing Work with the Family Unit; Ongoing Work with the Child in Foster Care; Selection and Training of Foster Caretakers; Agency Responsibility in Meeting the Objectives of Foster Care.

Towle, Charlotte. Common Human Needs. National Association of Social Workers. Revised Edition. 1965. Part II.

Written originally for public assistance workers during the Great Depression, this small book contains practice wisdom, a distillation of essential theory for social workers and a humane philosophy which makes it still uniquely valuable. Part II is a presentation of the individual and the family in terms of basic drives and needs and of the modes of helping that are most likely to actualize strengths.

Name of Social Worker _____

Agency _____

Referral/Application: Source: _____ Date: _____

Request or Complaint _____

Identifying Information:

	Name	Address	School or Employment	Birthdate
Father				
Mother				
Other Guardian				
Children (identify referred child)				

Source of Study Information — Date — Place

Interviews: with Child _____

Mother _____

Father _____

Other Children _____

Extended Family _____

Entire Family _____

Other _____

Reports: from School _____ Date

Physician _____

Other _____

DECISION (check one):

____ No Service

____ Service in home

____ Placement

____ Other (specify)

Justification for decision: _____

CRITERION I

NATURE OF THE PRESENTING PROBLEM

DATA	NOTES: FACTUAL CONTENT AND OBSERVATIONS
I. Parent's view of the problem Interviews with parents: How do they explain the problem? How have they reacted to it? What was happening concurrently with the beginning of the problem? How have the parents tried to handle it? With what results? What do the parents see as a solution? What help do they want?	
II. Family's view of the problem Interview with entire family: How do other family members react to the problem? How do they explain it? What changes do they desire? What are they willing to work on? Will parents allow other family members to be involved?	

NATURE OF THE PRESENTING PROBLEM

DATA	NOTES: FACTUAL CONTENT AND OBSERVATIONS
III. Child's view of the problem Interview with child: Does he think a problem exists? How does he describe and explain it? How has he tried to change the problem? How has he adapted to it? What changes would he like? Can he be helped to trust the worker? IV. Role of Community Agencies Interview with significantly related persons (such as school, courts, clinics, others in the problematic situation) to understand the situation further and to enlist their cooperation.	

CRITERION I, con't.

NATURE OF THE PRESENTING PROBLEM

DATA	NOTES; FACTUAL CONTENT AND OBSERVATIONS
V. Referral Information Report from referral source Other agency reports	

CONCLUSIONS: State the type of presenting problems, their severity, duration, and extensiveness.

CRITERION II

PARENTS' PARENTAL CAPACITY

DATA	NOTES: FACTUAL CONTENT AND OBSERVATION
Qualities of parents which demonstrate adaptive capacity and potentials for adequate parenting. Use information from the interview with the parents and from observation of the parents. I. <u>Perception, judgment, adaptability, self-perception and pathology.</u> How do the parents describe their life situation in the context of the present problem? Do they blame others? Is their view of the situation realistic? How do the parents describe their relationships with others? What is the balance of give and take? Are there repetitive patterns of ineffective adaptations? Is stress usually met by acting out? Was each parent adequately cared for as a child? If not, has each reached some reasonable perspective about the deficiencies of his parents? Are there evidences or reports of mental illness, addictions, delinquency?	

CRITERION II, con't.

PARENTS' PARENTAL CAPACITY

DATA	NOTES: FACTUAL CONTENT AND OBSERVATIONS
What is the general level of vitality, mood, emotional affect? Is manner and dress appropriate? Is there evidence of self-neglect or self care? In what way do the parents present themselves to the agency? What is their mode of relating to the social worker?	

CONCLUSIONS: Characterize the general level of the parents' functioning adequacy, identify the ar in which the functioning reveals problems, and indicate the severity of the problem. Note parents' strengths.

CRITERION III

ORGANIZATION OF THE FAMILY AND FAMILY SUPPORT SYSTEMS

DATA	NOTES: FACTUAL CONTENT AND OBSERVATIONS
Evidence of the family as an effective unit, meeting the needs of the members, especially the children. Use information from the home visit, interviews with the parents and other family members. I. Family Roles Who sets rules? Are they appropriate? How are the children disciplined? By whom? Is one child considered the major problem in the family? What are daily routines in family? What are eating and sleeping patterns? Do routines provide for parental supervision? How do the children and parents behave toward each other? II. Stability of Family What is the general atmosphere of the home? Chaotic? Crisis-laden?	

ORGANIZATION OF THE FAMILY AND FAMILY SUPPORT SYSTEMS

DATA	NOTES: FACTUAL CONTENT AND OBSERVATIONS
How closed-in is the family? Is their communication easily understood by others? What degree of independence do family members have from each other? What is the situation regarding duration of marriage? Separations? Other marriages? Alliances? Children from other unions? Children placed outside the home? What has been the economic status of the family over time? What is the health status of the family members? What is the educational level of the family? III. Relationships to Extended Family What is the extent of supportive help from relatives? Is there evidence of continuing dependence as opposed to appropriate separation from other relatives?	

CRITERION, III con't.

ORGANIZATION OF THE FAMILY AND FAMILY SUPPORT SYSTEMS

DATA	NOTES: FACTUAL CONTENT AND OBSERVATIONS

CONCLUSIONS: Characterize the level of organization or disorganization of the family, strength and hazard for child care.

CRITERION IV

DEVELOPMENTAL STATUS AND CONDITION OF THE CHILD

DATA	NOTES: FACTUAL CONTENT AND OBSERVATIONS
State of health and adjustment of each child as evidence of adequacy of care. Use information obtained from the interview with the parents, the interview with the child, observation of the child, and school and medical reports. I. Physical Status Size, nutrition, hygiene. Motor skills. Current physical complaints, handicaps. History of serious illness, injuries, hospitalizations. II. Social and Emotional Adjustment Sharing relationships with siblings and peers. Need-meeting relationships with parents and teachers. Evidences of an over-needy child. Evidences of a solitary or untrusting child. Behavior problems: type, duration, parental handling. Dependence of the child on the parents, especially the mother. The extent to which he can tolerate separation. Reaction of the parents to separation from the child.	

DEVELOPMENTAL STATUS AND CONDITION OF THE CHILD

DATA	NOTES: FACTUAL CONTENT AND OBSERVATIONS
Probable reaction of the child to being away from his family. III. Intellectual development School placement and grades. Observation of child's speaking and reasoning skills. IV. History of previous placements Child's adjustment. Parent's reaction.	

CONCLUSIONS: For each child identify problems, assess their severity, and indicate their seemi relationships to parental care or to the need for special services; assess the c probable reaction to separation and his capacity to develop a substitute attachme